

The DIAMOND THIEVES

By ARTHUR STRINGER

X.—A FENCE IN ARCADY

I WOUND back the broken gate, powdering with dust, and stepped into the dilapidated house. The house itself was a dilapidated structure of many rooms, as hopeless in the squalid ugliness that it made me smile at as the thought that I had found the place that I was looking for. I stepped up to the door of the house and knocked on the faded and grubby screen. I stood there for several moments before a stammering woman appeared with a baby held over her hip.

"Are you Mrs. Gottlieb?" I asked, with a sunny smile as I could manage.

"Yes, ma'am," she acknowledged, as she began to fidget the infant on her hip. I had taken the trouble, of course, to find out every name I could along the line of addresses.

"I was told that you might possibly have some old walnut for sale," I blithely explained. "I'm looking for old furniture of forest-grown black walnut. And I'm prepared to pay you quite handsomely for any old pieces you might care to sell."

I was, in reality, looking for something much more important than old walnut. I was looking for the trail of one Spider Houston, the gem thief, who had stolen some \$70,000 worth of jewelry from a private car on the New York Central at Elkhart, where he purchased a 4-year-old Spider car, explaining that he was an oil man interested in the western Ontario fields. Spider and his car had been traced as far westward as the city of St. Thomas, but somewhere between that city and the Detroit river the trail had vanished. And that was why I was prospecting so carefully along the Talbot Road for specimens of antique furniture in which I had no way in the world of making any money.

"So I explained still further to the stammering woman in the doorway that I didn't care how old the pieces might be. It was a chance, I pointed out, of making some good money for something that was of no further service to her.

"What'd you give for a highboy?" she demanded.

"I couldn't tell until I looked it over," I explained, as I pushed my way in through the door. For the basic motive of this antiquarian quest of mine was to bring me into off-handed and unguarded conversation with the different householders on the dusty highway along which Spider Houston had presumably preceded me.

"Where is the highboy?" I asked, with forced politeness.

"It's down in the granary," explained the thin-lipped woman. "I could go there and look at it." I half inquired and half suggested.

"Yes, ma'am," said Mrs. Gottlieb, as she resumed her jiggling of the crying infant.

I was glad to get out into the open air again. I made out a number of dilapidated wooden buildings clustered about a straw stack, and approached them abstractedly, still oppressed by the air of hopeless squalor into which I had wandered.

Then I stopped short. For from the building before which I stood I could distinctly hear the sound of sobbing.

I stepped to the weather-stained door which was partly open, and peered inside. There, on a pile of grain beside an orange-red fanning mill, crouched a girl of about 12 or 13. Her matted hair, bleached almost black by the sun, hung over her face. But what glared me to the spot was the discovery that the child's clothing had been torn apart at the back, from the neck down. This left exposed the white skin of the bony young shoulders and the slender torso, almost as low as the waistline. Across this white skin I could plainly see a row of welts. I knew at a moment what it meant. The child had been beaten, cruelly, atrociously beaten.

"Little girl," I said, as I stepped down into that grimy place. She looked up at me with dull and swollen eyes. Her face I could see, was a livid one. But the body shook with convulsive sobs and the disheveled hair between the bare and bony knees.

I knelt down beside her. "You're not afraid of me, are you?" I pleaded, trying to control myself as I studied that out and watered back at closer range. I planned the torn waist gently back over the bare shoulders and slipped a hand under the tattered and pasted-up of the tear-stained face that seemed bowed with all the tragedy of all the ages.

The child still sobbed as I wiped her eyes.

"Now tell me all about it," I crooned as I pushed back the matted hair.

"He licked me," she finally and tragically whimpered. "Uncle Eph licked me."

"Why?" she didn't answer my question.

"Low old man," I asked. "Fourteen," she said, from the pathetically stunted little body.

"Well, your Uncle Eph will never beat you again," I declared. "What's your name?"

"Serena," and it took some questioning to establish the fact that the name was really Serena—Serena Gottlieb.

"When Uncle Eph licked me, I went on," I think I'm going to be here several days and all this time I want you to remember that I'm your friend and that I'm trying to help you. What are you going to do now?"

"I've got to go back to the house and work the mill," she explained in her flat and listless voice.

"And then? Tell me everything you can."

"I put the milk through the separator and set out the cream cans for the collector. Then I wash the separator and set out the separator to the place where the separator driver set out the fire for the time."

"With Serena, while you're setting those cans out, I have a little talk with him. You remember one thing, that you and I are going to be good friends, and I'll help you."

I left the dusty granary and went back to the dilapidated house, already redoubled of feeling. Mrs. Gottlieb greeted me with a stare as flat as her face.

"Mrs. Gottlieb, I've had that old highboy and pay you \$20 for it," I said as I handed my bag. "And I'll give you more for a stove, looking if you want me to. I'll turn over any evening. Any kind of bed will do me as long as there's a roof over my head."

"You'll be right next to the roof," she said as she took the money in her bony fingers. "I'll have my walnut timber on this farm," I asked by way of diversion.

"I haven't answered the housewife as she hurried off to her crying off-spring. "How old is the highboy?" I asked. "The highboy is a 4-year-old Spider car, right away. I'm the Bell agent for this district, and the chief over to Chatham sent the call on me. He's testing the car down along the Talbot Road for 20 miles back."

"What chief?"

"The chief of police," announced the housewife, giving neighborly tip the full benefit of the announcement. And the best way to have your talk with New York," he snatched his lips over that delectable word as though it were a peppercorn. "To ride back with me in my spavish-proof motorcar."

I knew at once I was Inspector Spies trying to get in touch with me from the house office. It reminded me that I was there at the edge of a western Ontario road, where I made me realize how remote from my own life was the problem which had loomed so preposterously big before my angry eyes. Yet as I looked at that watery-eyed child

standing me the newcomer was a person of importance.

"All right, they're waiting," he announced, as he opened the door and motioned for me to take the receiver from his hand.

A moment later I was put on a New York wire and I could distinctly hear the voice of Sloan calling for our password.

"Boy, Hainy, you'll have to call it on that Spider Houston case," said the voice over the wire. "He closed one of Houston's men gathered Houston in that night at Detroit."

"And how about the haul?" I asked.

"There wasn't a thing on Houston. But Hainy reports he can't third degree anything out of Houston himself. That's the situation, except the Tiffany people have doubled the reward. They're offering \$14,000, now, for the stuff in hand."

"You're to come back," was the characteristically curt comment. And the wire went dead and the connection was lost before I could as much as say a word.

I promptly decided to take my time about going back to Houston, and as Postmaster Hurley collected me back to the station I found myself waiting for the first train to New York, set out in a lonely state on a rickety center table. It was Mrs. Gottlieb who waited on me. I was tired and I was glad to take the unshaded oil lamp and climb to

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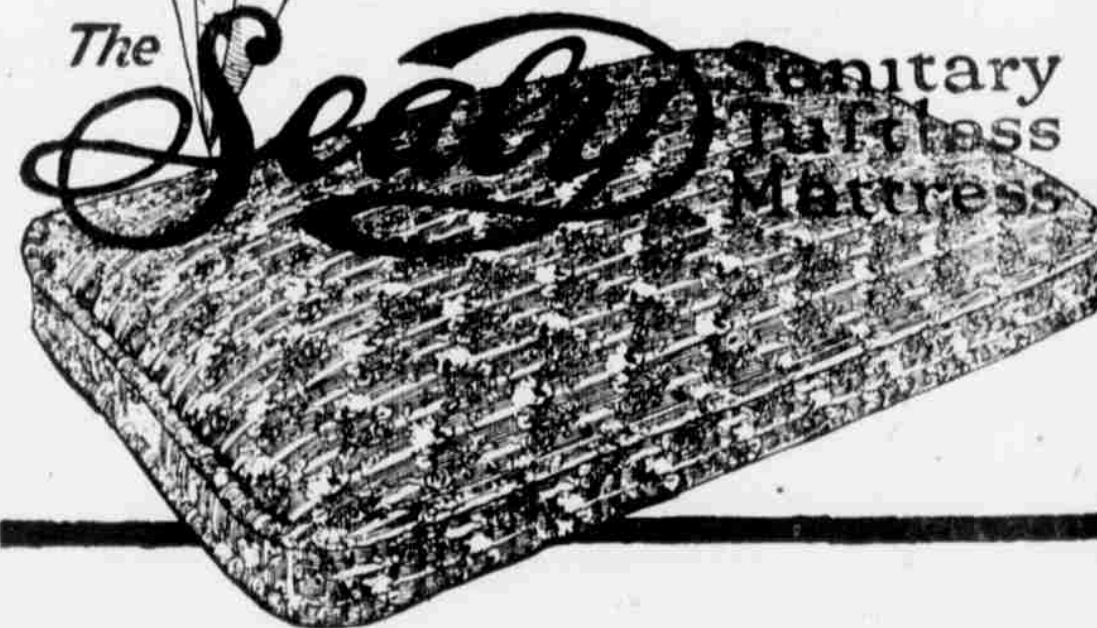
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Investigate the Sealy today. Sleep on it tonight. Know the pleasurable sense of TUFTLESS Comfort. And remember—the Sealy never grows old—an economy!

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